Students' Perspectives on Academic Writing in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This study brings together three student comments and three theoretical constructs taken from Bakhtin's (1981) collection of essays *The Dialogic Imagination*, written in the 1930s. Bakhtin's concepts of the chronotope, interanimation and the monologic provide lenses on a shifting student perspective on authoritative writing in universities and a potential change in future forms of academic writing. The result is an exploration of how time and space together affect and alter modes of academic communication, how communication itself emerges from dialogues that combine our own and others' thinking, and how attempts to close down and conventionalize academic practices will (and can usefully) be overcome through experimentation with genre. Being dialogical entails engaging with the emergent culture, not ditching its immediate predecessor: we will not 'unlearn' how to read and write for print but we can expand our repertoire beyond it.

Introduction: A dialogic perspective on academic writing

Academic papers in Humanities journals and textbooks tend to be packed with references, suggesting one or more asynchronous dialogues among a multitude of academic writers. Authors acknowledge each others' writing, and perhaps valorize, critique or extend it and thereby incorporate it into their own work. Where it works well, there is a sense of moving the discussion on. Students are expected to emulate this practice, but most academics will have heard student complaints about the rigidity of citation conventions and the difficulties they present for both reading and writing. This paper looks at some recent expressions of postgraduate student resistance in the context of writing in and about digital environments and asks whether they may be indicative of a transitional stage in academic writing globally, with an associated need for a change in teaching and writing practices. It thereby draws on dialogues with students to question what may be happening to the broader academic dialogues found within academic journals, student essays and newer forms of academic text.

An emphasis on the dialogic nature of academic life has been picked up by a number of contemporary writers who extend the prescient work of Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist (1895-1975). Bakhtin's work is itself not an easy read, in part because of the way his texts emerged from the 1920s onwards in a turbulent historical period in his country, with associated difficulties of attribution and translation, but also because of his idiosyncratic style and use of extensively elaborated concepts. Three of these are borrowed for this study, from Bahktin's essays on the novel published in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin, 1981). They will be further explained as they are introduced but a brief definition is necessary as they are referred to throughout the paper. They are:

- The chronotope – a mutually constitutive configuration of time and space: for example, a meeting or a journey.
- Interanimation – the process by which languages and dialogues mutually illuminate each other: for example, picking up a new understanding from an interlocutor's metaphor.
- The monologic – in contrast to the dialogic where language and ideas are negotiated, the monologic is authoritative and fixed, not open to change: for example, the genre of classical epic poetry.

Other writers are now applying these ideas to the digital sphere: for example, Timmis and Williams (2014) use the concept of the chronotope as a way of helping students make sense of transitions; Wegerif (2013) argues that the print era has tended towards the monologic and that this is now being challenged through the advent of the Internet. This current small study uses these three concepts from Bakhtin's work to analyse current academic dialogic practices, and to test the idea that these practices may themselves be in transition.

Three students' comments on referencing conventions

In the summer of 2013, I ran a three-week optional summer school on academic writing, for a small group of students (12) who were among those taking the fully online *MSc in Digital Education* at the University of Edinburgh. Students were encouraged to revisit an assignment, with a view to preparing a potential publication for a journal. It thus provided an opportunity for safe informal discussions, on topics including expectations of academic journals, and academic practices that students had observed when reading and writing for their own assignments.

I noted over several discussions that some students were finding academic conventions perplexing, especially compared to some of the more innovative practices that have gained a high profile for the *MSc in Digital Education* such as encouragement to undertake multimodal assignments. Three observations in particular continue to stand out, shown in Figure 1. Though on the surface they appear to be on the same familiar theme (how annoying academic referencing can be), they each present a different facet of rejection of traditional forms of the academic paper.

> Student 1
> The whole referencing and drawing on old material seems odd. I suspect Academic Writing is in for a change along with the rest of education.
>
> Student 2
> But is what X wrote good academic writing? Lots of references, complex thinking (complex language) but clearly it left most of us none the wiser.
>
> Student 3
> But the style of academic writing I find very stilted. I have a real problem with not being able to give an unsupported idea flight.…My thoughts are probably (certainly) not unique, but I struggle to understand how radically new ideas can appear if we have to have supporting reference.

Figure 1: Student views of academic writing as outdated, uncommunicative and not for emulation (written in a forum and a Skype text chat during the summer of 2013)

Student 1 seems to be referring to educational practices that are 'of their time' and about to change radically. Student 2 (supported by others who shared a dislike of a required reading from their introductory course) suggests that much current academic writing does not communicate effectively. Student 3's comment proclaims a resistance to 'doing' writing in this genre. I use the three themes to frame an analysis of the implications of these and other dialogues with Masters students. Perhaps ironically, in the light of these students' resistance

to over-citation, I augment my analysis with literature on dialogic writing to 'give flight to' the idea that a change is coming. My sense of this change has emerged from the interaction – or interanimation – between my reading and dialogues with these and other students. A particular interest is in how forms of academic referencing and attribution might relate to Bakhtin's claim that 'the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's' (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345-346) which Bakhtin contrasts with monologic or authoritative language. Bakhtin sees a tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces in language – with the former referring to official and centralising forms of discourse and the latter more to the living language in all its variations. I suggest that this tension is present in all three of the student comments in Figure 1.

The time-space dimension: 'Academic writing is in for a change'

Centripetal forces on language lead to closed and conventionalized 'monologic' forms of practice, reinforced over time by tradition, and separated from everyday life. Bakhtin suggests that most literary forms – with the notable exception of the novel – have this tendency. Thus the epic poem cannot interact with contemporary matters: it is completely walled off in the past (Bakhtin, 1981). Centrifugal forces (such as might be seen in parody or travesty) disrupt the temporally- and spatially-determined forms of literary and linguistic practice and allow for the emergence of new hybrid forms of practice and the recognition of multiple individual voices, with different time-space significance. A parody can bring closed forms into contemporary spaces and dialogues. This connectedness of time and space leads to an important construct for Bakhtin – the chronotope. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope as a time-space ordering device in literary contexts has been adopted by writers on education to suggest that our current conventionalized routines of time and space are outmoded (Lemke,

2004) and that there is a need for new ways of thinking about time and space in technology-mediated learning (Kumpulainen, Mikkola, & Jaatinen, 2014).

Student 1's suspicion that 'Academic Writing is in for a change' likewise suggests a set of practices regarded as outmoded and ripe for reconsideration. He is not alone. Teachers in digital environments are picking up a resistance from students to use of 'out-of-date' papers and books from the Library (Gourlay, 2014). Gourlay refers to this as just one of several current problems of 'slowness' for the students she spoke to, uncovering complex relationships with time. While student resistance to the perceived obsolescent may always have been the case, it is foregrounded now that production of texts is itself changing. As Wegerif observes, our educational dialogues are no longer restricted to 'face-to-face conversations in elite universities or in the long-time cycle of book or article writing and publishing' (Wegerif, 2013, penultimate paragraph, accessed via Kindle). Wegerif sees a danger that print encourages monologic approaches to education – complete, bounded and formalised to establish authority. With that time-cycle cut short, the Internet may allow us a route back to more dialogic practices. Whatever else is happening, the time-space configuration of our academic dialogues is changing.

We can discuss the effects of changing temporalities with students, of course, and even ask them to read about it, especially on a programme such as the *MSc in Digital Education*. The theme is picked up again in Figure 2, which shows an observation from a fourth student, commenting during the introductory course on the Masters programme. This student uses a traditional reference in the discussion forum and then augments her commentary with appropriate links – an approach welcomed by other students and providing an interesting merger of old and new forms of academic attribution.

Student 4

Fitzpatrick (2011) says

'Our work is likely to become far more collaborative than it has been in the past, and new modes of collaboration - over time, across distances - made possible by networked writing structures are likely to require us to think about originality quite differently, precisely because of the ways that these new modes intervene in our conventional associations of authorship with individuality.'

Neil Gaiman … has embarked on just such a project. He wanted to collaborate with his readers and did so using Twitter to create 'A Calendar of Tales'.

Figure 2: A merger of traditional and newer forms of citation

Student 4's communication shows that the author's message about authorship (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 14) has chimed with her own experience. Figure 2 shows the kind of citation that readers of student work welcome – it has a purpose and is followed up with commentary as the student adds her own contribution to the dialogue.

The *content* of Student 4's post is also directly relevant to the case I am making here: the deeply entrenched idea of original and individual authorship in the humanities is under pressure, as Fitzpatrick (2011) says in the citation in Figure 2. In addition to increased collaboration, the notion that a digital text is never considered 'complete' adds to our shifting understanding of individual authorship and even to the citations of antecedents. While she does not use the term herself, Fitzpatrick's argument could well be that there is a new 'chronotope' as the time-space relationships of texts and their production have changed considerably from their form in the print era.

While these discussions might themselves contribute to dialogues about the 'death' of the author (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1994), they also have a more immediate practical reference – a felt impact on students and academics writing essays and papers. Fitzpatrick draws attention to the way print has created academic writing as 'production', which is what

gives it its authority – but only when it is complete (as in a published journal paper), creating anxiety until that has happened (Fitzpatrick, 2011, pp. 10-11). It is this sense of completeness and individual production that is now being challenged through digital media and may indeed mean that Student 1 in Figure 1 above will be proved correct. It may be that the static and complete authoritative form of the academic paper will be relegated to an 'absolute past' in the same way as the epic form in relation to the novel (Bakhtin, 1981). This does not mean that it will disappear. However, it perhaps no longer lends itself to lengthy asynchronous dialogical communications: that role will have been superseded by newer forms of practice.

Communication: 'It left most of us none the wiser'

The printed 'voices' will not disappear from our culture, but in Bakhtin's terms they will be interanimated through engagement with new contexts. Interanimation occurs at all levels of Bakhtin's analysis of language: across languages, ideologies, genres and utterances. Even apparently monologic and conventionalized discourse is subject to interanimation through parody and application of newer transgressive forms (Bakhtin, 1981). Interanimation means that one person's words are taken on by others, who make them their own through their own practice. It is happening all the time.

Other writers I am referencing here tend to subscribe to the view that academic writing should be communicative and dialogical: 'The author…has always been a participant in an ongoing conversation' (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 7). 'The Internet makes global dialogue a possibility, but it is the job of education to make this a reality.' (Wegerif 2013, final sentence). Many students might agree with Student 2 in Figure 1 that some academics are not so good at this, leaving their readers 'none the wiser'. I do not see this as a plea for 'dumbing down' – and I have enough experience of reflecting on my own practices as a student to

recognise that academic progress can frequently arise from grappling with a demanding and initially incomprehensible text. However, it is useful to think about what happens when participants are actually excluded from the dialogue (or exclude themselves).

A student might be missing from a potential dialogue because they do not yet understand it sufficiently to engage in it or to 'try on' the discourse of the field (Bartholomae, 1985). They may need to be exposed to the dialogue at a more appropriate level. Alternatively, they might not even want to participate in academic dialogue through essay writing, and instead get someone else to write for them – through forms of plagiarism or purchase from an essay mill. An academic might be missing the opportunity of a dialogue with a student because they are reading only for compliance or looking at surface features of the writing. In a different kind of situation, they may have subcontracted the assessment (and thereby the reading) of the student's writing to a postgraduate student or an automated system. Alternatively, they might be missing from their own professional dialogues as they have not managed to complete a paper or publish in a place where people are likely to read it.

Some examples of missing participants in dialogue show up in forms of writing that have become a kind of currency as opposed to communication. For students and their 'suppliers', this might be the essay in exchange for a grade or money, written to a 'blueprint' (English, 2011). For academics, 'publishing has become tied with reputation, career success and remuneration' (Nwagwu, 2010, p. 233) rather than communication. Nwagwu provides an interesting example of how a centripetal centralizing force may be amplified through use of digital technologies: scholars in the developing world have been excluded from representation in scholarly ranking, reinforcing a Western/Northern hegemony.

Though probably not the intention of most students and academics, the issue of missing participants points to a real danger in the loss of the original communicative function of academic writing. This is especially troubling when academic written dialogues have

themselves become interanimated by neoliberal discourses, and where the purchasing power of degree classifications and citation indexes dominates at the expense of the actual communicative practices these academic 'products' should represent. When there are missing participants, the academic dialogue itself is at risk; it has been replaced by something else.

Constraint and authority: '…not being able to give an unsupported idea flight'

Bakhtin would associate missing participants with 'authoritative discourse', which has to be accepted or rejected totally along with the authority itself (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). Authoritative discourse is monologic and not open. However, Bakhtin's view that all language is inherently dialogical (Voloshinov, 1994) perhaps contains a route to help all my students vent their frustration and, particularly, Student 3 to give an unsupported idea flight. Bakhtin's detailed analysis of the uses of mimicry, parody and travesty highlights, in literary forms, how closed and monologic discourses become opened up for dialogue.

Student 3 in Figure 1 clearly wishes his own writing to be communicative – in his desire to 'give an idea flight' without having to find supportive evidence. This is a recurring theme I had seen in this student's writing as his tutor the previous semester. Like Student 1 he seems impatient for the revolution of the digital age to take hold and sweep away academic convention. While at the time he could find online conversations about themes he was interested in, the themes themselves were too new to have made it into academic journals. His concerns are echoed by some of my current students wondering how to appropriately acknowledge myriad forms of communication via social media, such as Twitter. The fact that Student 3 has things to say but no perceptible academic context in which to say them is probably behind his rejection of academic writing as a usable genre.

Worded this way, Student 3's predicament may suggest that academic writing as a genre would itself benefit from being 'refreshed' from time to time, and this has certainly been suggested with respect to students (Andrews, 2003). Andrews writes of inspirational student essays that move away from the norm (or 'blueprint' as Fiona English, 2011 puts it). But when Andrews shared a draft of his paper with students, they warned him about inconsistency of response from tutors: many students prefer to stick to what is safe and this leads them into giving what is expected (the monologic) rather than generating dialogue. There may never be a complete solution to this impasse: excellent students can break the (often tacit) 'rules' because they know what they are doing. In order to get there, they'll have taken risks at the 'cost' of grades.

English (2011) claims (and demonstrates) that 'there are many different genres with which academic knowledge can be expressed' (p.207). Student 3 perhaps needs to be given opportunities to let his ideas fly, but using different genres that allow him to join in conversations about his ideas, for example using a journalistic or creative genre. English found that 'regenring' writing assignments opened up more possibilities for student understanding – a result I also experienced (on a much smaller scale) with my summer school students. She also uses concepts from Bakhtin and his circle of colleagues to explore, among other things, the complexity of using the speech of others in shaping our own, going beyond citation practices and even resulting in new intentions (p. 95). Changing the parameters of the discourse allows more voices, more nuances, more interanimation … and a greater understanding of the shaping effects of genre. Recognizing and challenging the monologic may be half the battle.

Conclusion

The time would seem to be right for experimenting with academic writing and other genres to support students and academics to (re)engage in dialogues instead of looking at blueprints and monologues in a tired and compliant way. We need forms of academic papers – and possibly other genres too – that can carry our contemporary dialogues including those elements that began in the past but remain a significant aspect of our current understanding, such as the work of Bakhtin from last century. More specifically, using Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope highlights the potentially hidden and ignored time-space dependencies of our publication practices and our processing of student essays. As just a small example, student essays are no longer pieces of paper handed in to a secretary; they are digital documents uploaded via a drop-box, to be read online perhaps and with associated opportunities for hyperlinking and annotation. But, despite these tremendous chronotopic changes and potential, digital essays do not appear to have developed accordingly for the most part. There are early signs of a change, however, including some of our own students' multimodal assignments, and some practices in Massive Open Online Courses, such as *Digital Storytelling* (DS106) at the University of Mary Washington. New forms of multimodal journals, for example *Kairos*, are starting to attract academics too, hinting that the academic paper may also have an opportunity to evolve.

Digital environments have opened up opportunities for interanimating discourse; equally, however, they can be used to create new monologues and closure. For some, for example, there are new strictures on how long commentaries should be, in order to suit formats dictated by the technology, such as software for originality-checking and feedback. Such software is having other effects on the dialogic, through suggesting problems with trust and compliance. An additional barrier may be the sheer volume of information sources which

is seen by some of our students as inhibiting for dialogue. There is so much potential interanimation that some feel there is no centre.

The exploration of these three Bakhtinian concepts – the chronotope, interanimation and the monologic – has suggested a need to think about changes to our time-space configurations, our ability to engage with and take on others' ideas constructively, and our need to be alert to inappropriate attempts at conventionalizing and monologizing what should still be open to negotiation. We should be aware of how time and space affect our dialogues, of absent participants from dialogues and of attempts to prevent dialogue. We shall need research into dialogical – and monological – capacities and tendencies in emerging forms of digital writing. The essays and academic papers that were suitable for the print age may provide a useful starting point, but our academic repertoires could be usefully extended.

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